

Disability Consciousness: A Prolegomenon

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Imagining what another person's life is like from the inside is difficult, especially when one's own abilities and disabilities differ markedly from those of the other person. This essay lays some of the conceptual groundwork for an ongoing project on disability and education. Disability raises challenges for education that have both moral and aesthetic dimensions. My overall aim is to develop conceptual tools for theorizing disability in a way that values art and literature and the sensory-aesthetic dimension of bodily experience. I develop and argue for a conception of disability consciousness for all persons through an examination of Christopher Nolan's autobiographical novel, *Under the Eye of the Clock*. A satisfactory or adequate theory of disability education requires that we understand consciousness as more than surface awareness. Indeed, disability involves a problem of mind and body, and requires a conception of disability as an embodied consciousness. Connecting mind and body might enable educators to show students how conceptions of body require interrogation from all sides to resist those strategies of thought that marginalize and degrade the personhood of those with different bodies.

Imagining the life of another is more than peering into the other's mental life. It may also involve imaginatively conceiving what it is like to experience another's body, and this in turn must involve other sources of aesthetic engagement when the "Other" bears the label "disabled." Nolan's fiction allows us to do this with his autobiographical hero Joseph. Indeed, works of literature generally allow imaginative projection into many different lives from the ones we know best, and we know education may draw pedagogical power from aesthetic engagement of body and mind in art and literature. Crucial to disability consciousness, as I conceptualize it, is an imaginative capacity for bodily empathy. Therefore, I argue for aesthetic engagement as an educational means of developing disability consciousness in people with different abilities and disabilities.

AN ABSENCE OF DISABILITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Joseph was getting used to hearing himself discussed. Quite openly, students discussed his defects, and they were certain of his non-ability to understand, they decided to be as vociferous as if he were not really present. They wondered if the cripple wore a nappy and longed to examine him to find out for certain. Then they discussed his lack of intelligence. They chose tags by which they would rate him. They bandied about the words weirdo, eejit, cripple, dummy and mental defective. They decided he should not be in a school for normal children and set about ridiculing the headmaster and staff for being the innocents they apparently were. Posing as a fool, Joseph listened and learned how other students saw him. Sometimes he would react and suddenly hold his head up very high, and gaze long and searchingly at them. All in vain, they grinned in ridicule at his seeming sensible.¹

This excerpt from *Under the Eye of the Clock* illustrates different perspectives on disability that demonstrate a clear absence of what I want to call disability consciousness. First, there is the protagonist Joseph, a young man with a condition called spastic quadriplegia that keeps him from walking or speaking. Then there are

the other students, several adolescent boys likely Joseph's age, who walk and move about without impediment, who speak at will, believing themselves to be how everyone should be. There is the perspective of the narrator, the voice of the author, who grants access to what Joseph thinks and what he feels in ways unknown to the other players in the story.

Notice the other students do not talk to Joseph. They talk about him. From the narrator's perspective, Joseph is deeply conscious of what others think of him. The narrator recounts that the other students look for words to describe Joseph, as though they need a label to understand what he is, leaving unanswered the question of who he is. The labels they discuss make it clear that Joseph is a "defective," clearly out of place among them, the normal children. The labels they discuss are labels of rejection. Joseph is a "weirdo," a "cripple," an "eejit," and he has no intelligence, apparently because he cannot move or speak as they do. The other students, however, do not know what Joseph thinks of them, nor can they imagine he might be able to have thoughts about them.

Susan Wendell's *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* helpfully illustrates perspectives on disability. She writes, "I use the terms 'rejected body' and 'negative body' to refer to those aspects of bodily life (such as illness, disability, weakness, and dying), bodily appearance (including most forms of bodily suffering) that are feared, ignored, despised, and/or rejected in a society and its culture."² Joseph clearly has a rejected body as judged by many of his peers, because his apparent differences make him an "Other." One striking feature of Joseph's "Otherness" is the extent to which he is rendered an object, having no legitimated point from which to interpret his experience of the world for others. Joseph is categorized with labels that admit no individuality and function as labels of rejection. Joseph is an eejit, a cripple, and so on. Notably, this process of generalizing difference is social in character and plays out among those who see themselves as comfortably similar.

Wendell speaks of this social process of extending and attributing difference in the following way:

When we make people "Other," we group them together as objects of our experience instead of regarding them as subjects of experience with whom we might identify, and we see them primarily as symbolic of something else, usually, but not always, we reject and fear and project onto them.³

Assessed by his peers, Joseph is portrayed from one perspective as repellent, with remarks intended to distance him from the "normal children." Wendell suggests that the Otherness of people with disabilities, mental or physical, confronts "normally-abled" notions of control over bodies in ways that push nonconforming others to the margins. People do not wish to imagine themselves as dependent or contingent. Ironically, this occurs despite the fact that everyone is dependent and contingent upon the physical and social environment in which one finds oneself.

Wondering to what degree Joseph is dependent, his fellow students speculate whether he wears a "nappy," and even consider physical violation to validate their speculations. Wendell's text describes how disability globalizes all aspects of life

defining personhood. Physical dependence associated with immobility or limited mobility is analogous to moral and mental incompetence. Indeed, the nappy becomes symbolic of Joseph's failure to control his bodily functions, and, as Wendell describes, a "failure to control the body is one of the most powerful symbolic meanings of disability."⁴ If one needs a nappy, diaper, or incontinence brief, how is one's identity changed in the eyes of others? The lack of disability consciousness on the part of Joseph's peers (and others he encounters) has its deleterious effects on Joseph's consciousness as well, as the following excerpt illustrates.

DEVELOPING DISABILITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Joseph was well used to all the weeping Jesus comments about his cross. He was now trying to break free from society's charitable mould. He saw how others saw him but he wanted to show them how truly wrong they were. Fenced in all sides he heard things he was never meant to hear and he saw things he was never meant to see. How could he ever get the chance to let folk see what they never thought existed? How can I conquer my body, mused the paralyzed boy? Paralyzed I am labeled, but can a paralytic move? My body rarely stops moving. My arms wage constant battle trying to make me look a fool. My smile can sometimes freeze thereby making me seem sad and uninterested. Two great legs I may have, but put my body weight on them and they collapse under me like a house of cards.⁵

Wendell acknowledges that real limitation, such as loss of limb or spinal injury, may be part of disability; however, the meaning of limitation is itself socially constructed. Changes in the physical environment often radically expand or contract capabilities of persons with physical or sensory deficits. Changes in technology shift definitions of limitation and conceal the degree to which everyone remains dependent on a larger social network. Difference does not always mean defect. The members of the deaf community, for example, communicate as effectively as speaking persons do, although differently. People who require wheelchairs move as effectively as people who ambulate in environments without obstacles. Difference need not mean an unconditional lack of ability. In sum, Wendell's perspective on thinking about disability requires first acknowledgement that disability is not rare enough to be disregarded. Secondly, social considerations influence thinking about disability as much as anything else. And, thirdly, opinions about others, the so-called disabled, and their lack of control over themselves, say much about definitions of self-control: who makes them, and who gets to apply them.

Wendell provides a philosophical analysis of disability as a social construction with complex, and often profoundly harmful, consequences. Her analysis illuminates how Joseph comes to be the "rejected body," bringing to consciousness the problems of identity that disability poses.

HANNAH ARENDT: CONSCIOUSNESS TO CONSCIENCE

Hannah Arendt never wrote specifically about disability. Nevertheless, in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt did theorize relationships among identity, consciousness, and conscience. The first story excerpt noted above offers examples that might instantiate each of these concepts. The complexity of identity arises as perspectives are compared. This identity is formed by not only what one thinks and feels about oneself, but also about how one is affected by the thoughts and

feelings of others. Arendt sees identity as emerging from a plurality that includes the dynamics of self-identity and relationships with others. In other words, the formation of identity involves reconciling multiple points of view to establish a sense of identity. Arendt describes “consciousness” as the “curious fact that in a sense I am *for myself*,”⁶ that is, I am aware of myself as the subject of *my* experience. The reader realizes that Joseph’s identity is a dialogue of his internal experience with what he hears of how others experience him. The narrative promotes understanding that Joseph’s consciousness is an awareness of himself as a subject with choices as to whether he accepts or rejects whatever happens, with a visceral “yes” or “no.” Confronted as a rejected body, Joseph chooses to “pose as a fool” to immunize himself from the cruel things said. The narrator stirs the reader’s conscience by recounting, “Sometimes [Joseph] would react and suddenly hold his head up very high and gaze long and searchingly at them.”

Throughout her works, Arendt describes the need to shift viewpoint, taking on the points of view of others before judging a situation as right or just.⁷ The transition from consciousness to conscience requires a mental visitation with the possible perspectives held by others. This means a bringing into consciousness of other points of view to consider. In the excerpts from the story, the narrator becomes the voice of conscience speaking to the reader, promoting movement from point of view to point of view. We are compelled to confront the divergent points of view as an omniscient yet empathic observer. What Joseph thinks and feels about himself is not the same as what others see and feel about him. This contradiction provokes one’s thinking and feeling, and invites comparisons and contrasts between what others say about Joseph and what he thinks and feels. Finally, one has to return to one’s own point of view and judge what one thinks and feels, judging the rightness or wrongness of Joseph’s rejection.

As we read a description of a situation from Joseph’s point of view, our consciousness splits literally in two, becoming what Arendt calls the “two-in-one”: “I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I am clearly not just one. A difference is inserted in my Oneness.”⁸ Merely by reading a narrative and feeling oneself feeling the emotions and thoughts of a character, the conscious process of emerging conscience is validated. Would a person choose to “pose as a fool,” as others leveled insults? Would one react in anger? If one could not express anger in words, what would one do? If one could not make one’s body move in protest, what would one do? What would one feel? All of these questions appear in thought as a dialogue occurring within the self. While one can never know exactly how another person feels, perhaps one might learn enough to open up one’s point of view to the reality of another person’s experience.

According to Arendt, it seems this two-in-one requires perhaps several provisional voices inside a person’s head, and, yet, one always returns to a conversation involving just two, the self and conscience. In light of the first excerpt, the questions that arise include: Would one be like the other students who objectify Joseph? Would one defend Joseph? If one were Joseph, a person who thinks and feels but happens not to move efficiently or speak, would one wish for an advocate? Such questions

provoke consciousness and stir the dialogue of emerging conscience. The reason for this, according to Arendt, is that we cannot tolerate a contradiction within ourselves; hence, we are driven to reconcile differing points of view, at least provisionally. This reconciliation works itself out as a choice, a decision. It is a judgment about what is right and wrong.

In attempting to theorize what disability consciousness might mean, I have suggested Wendell's concept of disability as a social construct to illuminate the malleability of disability as a category. Secondly, learning from Arendt, I want to suggest how moving back and forth between perspectives can in a sense "train one's imagination to go visiting" to another person's point of view.⁹ The problem of reconceptualizing disability arises because the word itself appears as a dismissal of ability that collapses all people into two categories, the "normally-abled," and then the "disabled," all the others. The danger with such simple categorization is that important details are lost. Applied to people, categories serve to desensitize to individual or unique characteristics of a person as person. Arendt was clearly aware of this danger when she wrote,

The moment we say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in descriptions of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or "character" in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.¹⁰

Thinking from rejected perspectives antagonizes one's conscience to resolve conflicts in points of view. Real engagement in reconciling points of view forces acquiescence to the possibility that one could stand in the position of the Other if circumstances were different. As Wendell explains, there are a number of reasons the rejected perspective is avoided. "It is not just from fear of being or becoming abnormal that the rejected body is shunned. It is also shunned from fear of pain, illness, limitation, suffering, and dying."¹¹ Yet because disability even in some relative sense is a probability for every person, everyone has reason to consider "rejected perspectives."

As an illustration of a possible meaning for a disability consciousness that we might all cultivate, I offer the following excerpt from Nolan's novel describing a friendship between Joseph and several other "normally-abled" students. The striking difference from the first excerpt is that Joseph is described as an individual and not as an object. He is a subject of experience and recognized as such by his peers who seek out his point of view as a means of enriching their own.

CLEAR DISABILITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Boyhood became blissful now, friends became pals and school became relaxed. The debt due to John Medlycott the headmaster became enormous for now his dearest wish was coming true, his wheelchair pupil was but another pupil, no more than that, no less. Craving freedom to be himself but polestarred, nonetheless, Joseph was happier than he could convey. Communication was now two-way, his pals talked *to him*, he communicated with them. They had discovered the secret by which to chat with their silent friend, so it was nothing strange to try lifting his head by sticking a finger under his chin and begging, "Lift up your feckin' head, until we see what you are saying." Exactly thus did they get a feedback from him and thus it became completely normal to relate to his eyes pooling as if they were his lifeline for *their* world. As conversation tactics developed they learnt that youthful adventures interested him just as much as able-bodied them.¹²

The foregoing excerpt contrasts markedly with the scenario portrayed in the first excerpt, in that the students around Joseph recognize him as a person with whom they share the world. Joseph's inability to speak is no longer regarded as evidence of a lack or deficiency. There is interest in what Joseph thinks and feels in the ways he can communicate — there is interest in allowing him to be able in ways that he can. The foregoing excerpt, I argue, offers a clear case of disability consciousness, allowing individuality to emerge despite conditions or circumstances that unconsciously prompt people to label or categorize. Communication between people assumes thinking from the perspective of another. Moreover, in the foregoing excerpt, communication anticipates further communication, bridging differences of perspective between people. Thinking consciously from rejected perspectives might condition one against acquiescing to labels that prompt and sustain one's rejection in the first place.

Wendell offers a way of understanding how rejected bodies are socially constructed into rejected perspectives, and Arendt provides the conceptual language to reconstruct those understandings, allowing individuals to emerge as individuals and not as labels for rejected perspectives. Hence, the pedagogical advantage of a narrative like that of Nolan's novel, *I am claiming*, is an education of the moral imagination, allowing one freely to visit the worlds of many different others. The relevance for education involves exposing all students to different points of view while allowing reflection and the empathy that arise from such reflection to challenge notions of who particular people are in spite of bodily features or capacities or seeming incapacities. Thus, as I am theorizing disability consciousness, this idea draws from Arendt the importance of multiple points of view in the formation of judgment, and draws from Wendell insight into the deleterious consequences of failing to engage multiple points of view. Disability consciousness, therefore, emerges as a recognition of those strategies of thought standing in the way of understanding others as embodied selves with capacities to relate to others.

SOMATIC AWAKENING OF DISABILITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Each day the weary family finished their adventures by going for a swim... The lingering sun gashed the evening sky in colours of red, burnt ochre, golden orange and turquoise blue... Between them [Joseph's family] all hands joined forces to help Joseph swim and float in the warm currents. They floated him with them as they moved out to sea; he glowed with pleasure as he skimmed along, for he felt totally safe in their hands and through their efforts he sampled the joys of the abled-bodied.¹³

Multiple points of view characterize disability consciousness, demonstrating how reciprocity exists at various levels of experience: consciousness of self, of others, and of the interrelations of the two. In the excerpt above, Joseph enjoys an experience that addresses his capacities and not his limits. As John Dewey suggests, we are embedded in an environment, indeed, we are part of the environment that others experience; therefore, from an educational perspective we can engage others in ways that alter the collective experience of the environment to promote the sensory aesthetic dimensions to the moral and ethical betterment of all.¹⁴ Clearly, Joseph's family members are replicating an experience they have all had and are now having with Joseph — the intimate sharing of community and the human support

necessary to experience the surrounding environment in the warmth and buoyancy of the sea.

Moral engagement with others through imagination is one of the primary pedagogical tools that art and literature can bring to the educational environment. Moreover, as Nolan's fiction so fruitfully demonstrates, the soma and the consciousness are inextricably intertwined, such that to theorize disability consciousness, imagination requires a visitation among and between different perspectives to see and feel reality in the round. One of the primary features of disability consciousness as I am attempting to conceptualize it is the development of bodily empathy that is conscious and active in finding activities and experiences available to all people. I have suggested that aesthetic education, both through literary engagement and through somatic awakening, for teachers and students, is helpful to the development of a disability consciousness that accepts differences of ability and disability as normal environmental challenges for all live creatures. I have argued that the cultivation of disability consciousness among all persons may well require that educators have literary and aesthetic education to learn somatic empathy as part of self-awareness that takes into account the range of bodily experiences.

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1. Christopher Nolan, *Under the Eye of the Clock* (New York: Arcade, 2000), 29–30.
 2. Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 85.
 3. *Ibid.*, 60.
 4. *Ibid.*, 61.
 5. Nolan, *Under the Eye of the Clock*, 53.
 6. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 183 (emphasis added).
 7. See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 241. See also Arendt, *Life of the Mind*; and Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Richard Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
 8. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 183 and 185.
 9. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant*, 43.
 10. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 181.
 11. Wendell, *Rejected Body*, 85.
 12. Nolan, *Under the Eye of the Clock*, 32 (emphasis added).
 13. *Ibid.*, 76.
 14. John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005).